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ABSTRACT

The evolvement of the reading improvement program at Wayne State University is traced from its conception in 1941 to the present services being offered students and community residents. This description is divided into seven parts: development of the program, the current group program, the reading laboratory, evaluation of the student program, community programs, evaluation of the special programs, and summary. The community programs are separately delineated, as it is in this function that the Wayne State program departs from the traditional role of a university-oriented program. (NH)

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READING IMPROVEMENT IN A LARGE URBAN UNIVERSITY*

by Roger S. Pepper

The role of the reading improvement program in the large urban university which I represent has changed markedly over the years. It started with the limited goal of improving the visual efficiency, and hence reading speed, of the average or better college reader. Today its task involves not only service to a much larger and more heterogeneous university population but also participation in programs reflecting the university's increased concern with the problems of the urban community, especially those relating to the culturally and economically disadvantaged.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the development of our program as it relates to this dual function of service to university students and to the needs of a complex urban society.

Development of the Program

The Wayne State University reading improvement program started with the concern of a Detroit ophthalmologist over the number of college students among his clientele. In 1940, at the suggestion of Dr. Ralph Pino, Mrs. Greta Hultin DeLong, an orthoptic technician on his staff, conducted a survey entitled "Reading Load at Wayne State University with Attention to Amount of Visual Fatigue." The conclusions drawn from this survey indicated that only one-fourth of the Wayne students selected at random were efficient readers. Approximately one-half were handicapped in their studying by poor reading habits, and most of the students had visual difficulties only when reading or doing similar class work.

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This survey of their reading habits aroused student interest in the possibility of improving their skill. In the spring of 1941, in response to student requests, Mrs. DeLong organized several reading courses on a purely voluntary, non-credit basis. The program was supported financially by Dr. Pino. The enthusiastic response of students and interested faculty to these initial courses led the University to assume responsibility for the program the following year. It was placed under the supervision of the English Department of the College of Liberal Arts and a university wide advisory committee appointed by the president. It was transferred to the Division of Student Personnel in 1946, and officially entitled the Department of Reading Efficiency and Study Skills. Our classes for regular students are listed each quarter in the University Schedule of Classes. They are open to any student currently enrolled in the university regardless of class standing and college or school affiliation. Although no credit is given and no fees are assessed, students follow the normal registration procedures to enroll in these classes.

Initially, the sponsors emphasized the voluntary, non-credit, non-remedial nature of the program. The classes were offered for the average or better reader with no provisions for individual diagnosis or instruction. The focus of training was on the development of more efficient visual skills. Class exercises were designed to develop smooth or rhythmic eye movement patterns. Students practiced shifting their eye fixations across and down a page of x's to the beat of a metronome. The tachistoscope was employed to increase speed and span of perception. The Howard Reading Films were used to develop rhythmic eye patterns in reading connected phrases in a complete article. To transfer this training to normal reading and to provide a measure of progress, each class period included a timed rate-comprehension text exercise.

Evaluations of the program at that time indicate that these techniques did increase rate without loss in comprehension for large numbers of students. It soon became apparent, however, that this limited approach did not meet the varied needs of a heterogeneous university population. Separate classes in study skills were added in 1943 and vocabulary development in 1948. In addition, the staff gradually became more and more involved in individual counseling. After a few years' experience with these separate courses as well as various combinations of them, it was concluded that a single course which included all aspects of the program was most effective. Thus, in 1953, a combined reading efficiency, study skills, and vocabulary course became the basic offering of the Department. At the same time, the increase in individual counseling led to the establishment of a reading laboratory to handle students with special problems. This arrangement continues today as the general format of our program for regular students.

Although the organizational structure of the program has remained fairly stable, the growth of the university has increased the range of individual differences among our clientele. We not only have more freshmen, we also have more transfer students, more graduate students in a wider variety of specialities, more professional schools and more foreign students. The students now enrolled in our program reflect this diversity and, in addition, range in age from 15 to 57 years.

Fortunately, flexibility and experimentation have always been characteristic of the program. We have employed a wide variety of techniques, materials, mechanical devices, and class patterns. For example, we have moved from the original heavy emphasis on hardware through a period of no mechanical aids to our present selective use of these instruments.

The Current Group Program

Currently the program operates in the following manner. Selections of our basic course are offered each hour of the day on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for six weeks and on Tuesday and Thursday for nine weeks. Enrollment is limited to twenty per class. Since students select their own class, the major common element in each group is that they had that particular hour available in their schedules.

The first two periods include a discussion of the purpose of the program and the administration of the Survey Section, Diagnostic Reading Tests, and the Brown-Holtzman Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes. On the basis of this preliminary information, those students for whom the class appears inappropriate are invited to switch to the reading laboratory. In general, these would be graduate students, foreign students, those with some specific reading or study problem, and those who have previously taken the course.

The goal of the basic course is to assist students to develop the necessary skills and attitudes for dealing with the wide range of college studies. The main areas stressed are flexibility in rate, study type reading, vocabulary development, and efficient study techniques. These are developed through discussion and a variety of exercises. Several college level workbooks and numerous mimeographed lessons are employed. Although the tachistoscope or a reading film may be used occasionally to illustrate a specific point, they are not a standard ingredient in this group situation. On occasion the classes may be divided into two or three smaller sections in order to deal more directly with different levels of ability or the special problems of specific subgroups of students.

The Reading Laboratory

The students in the Reading Laboratory, in addition to those drawn from our regular classes, include self or faculty referrals with special problems, graduate students, foreign students, and those who have completed the basic course but with additional training. The Lab program is very flexible and individualized. Depending upon his stated objectives in entering the program, the student may receive diagnostic testing, counseling, remedial work, or developmental training in a specific skill.

In order to provide maximum service within the constraints of staff time and the facilities available, we have developed a series of semi-self-instructional programs. Initially, each student has a conference with the lab instructor during which his individual training objectives are established and a schedule arranged. He receives a folder which includes the sequence of exercises he is to pursue and a space to record his daily performance. The instructor checks his daily progress and makes changes in the program when necessary. Although much of the program can be completed independently, the instructor may work directly with an individual or small group on some specific problems. Through this approach we are able to have one instructor give individualized instruction within one lab class in such diverse areas as rate, vocabulary development, identifying main ideas, an study skills.

The equipment and materials available in the reading lab include: a tape recorder, EDL Listen and Read Tapes, SRA Reading Accelerators, EDL Tach X, the Controlled Reader, the Harvard Reading Films, the C-B Phrase Reading Films, a variety of college reading and study skills manuals, mimeographed exercises, and programmed materials.

Evaluation of the Student Program

As we gain experience with this multimedia approach to individual needs in the laboratory setting, we are also experimenting with this technique in our classes. We are modifying the more impersonal group instructional methods to give greater attention to individual differences in ability, skill, and need. A recent survey of student opinions indicates that we are making progress in this direction but are still short of our goal.

We find that these student evaluations, although sometimes uncomfortably realistic, are a valuable adjunct to those made by the staff. Let me cite a few examples. We agree, of course, with the majority of students who reported the course as helpful and appropriate in content but inadequate in length. When asked to rate the course in terms of their expectations, 6% said inadequate, 71% adequate, and 23% highly adequate. The latter figure, when viewed as an indication of the general effectiveness of the course, is disappointing. The most interesting and puzzling responses, however, were those made to a series of questions regarding the effectiveness of several of the specific methods and techniques taught in the course. The numbers indicating that they had not even tried to use a particular method ranged from 17 to 45 per cent. Findings such as these serve to keep us modest in our own evaluations and aware of the potential for better service to our students.

The program which I have just described is not unique to the urban university. Indeed, we have borrowed freely from the experiences of others in the college reading field in our efforts to make it more effective.

Community Programs

I would like to turn now to our community service function for it is in this area that we depart from the traditional role of a university orientated program.

Wayne has offered courses for non-students for many years. These have included adult education classes, a special summer program for college bound high school seniors and recent graduates, and numerous classes for business and industry. Classes have been conducted for lawyers, engineers, management personnel, scientists, purchasing agents, and bankers. For the most part, these have been developmental in nature, designed for average or better readers and offered on a voluntary basis. Thus, as with our regular students, we encounter few serious reading disabilities. In general, the individuals in these groups are highly motivated with good potential for improvement. Perhaps we should label them, as a point of reference, the culturally advantaged for they come from the segments of our society that have traditionally had the greatest access to the services of the university. I mention them here to indicate that this area, too, is an important part of the urban university community. Since these classes are fairly typical of those offered by many colleges and universities, however, I will not elaborate on them further at this time. Instead, I would rather take the balance of my time to discuss some of our more recent involvement in programs for those people who previously had the least access to the facilities of the university.

In response to the growing national awareness of the gross inequities within our society, Wayne has given high priority to programs related to the most critical of our urban problems. This concern is directed primarily toward the inner city and includes such diverse areas as urban planning, medical care, housing, and, of course, education.

With the increased involvement of the university in the community, the reading program has been called upon to serve a much more complex population of reading abilities. A listing of the major special programs with which we are working will illustrate this point.

1. Summer Institute Council on Legal Education Opportunity

The purpose of this program is to assist minority group college graduates who need help in meeting traditional law school admission standards. A reading improvement course was compulsory for all students. In addition, they were enrolled in three basic law courses.

2. Mayor's Committee on Human Resources Development

Classes were provided for the supervisory personnel and for counselor aides. The latter class was part of a job upgrading program for disadvantaged people. One purpose of the reading course was to improve their ability to deal with civil service examinations.

3. Upward-Bound

This program operates throughout the year to assist high school youngsters to develop the skills and motivation necessary to continue their education. During the summer they are on campus full-time for a wide range of educational, cultural, and recreational experiences. On the basis of academic performance and reading test scores, those judged to have deficiencies were assigned to a reading and study skills class. Others were permitted to take the course voluntarily.

4. Labor School

This school is operated by the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations. It is a two year program for working people who wish to broaden their general educational background. Entrance into the program is voluntary, but reading

improvement is one of the required courses. Other courses include Science Today, the Development of Industrial America, American Society, Effective Writing and Literature. The school provides a liberal arts orientation for individuals who, in general, do not perceive themselves as "fitting into" the traditional adult educational or extension programs.

5. Marginal Students

The final special project which I would like to discuss deals with high school graduates who do not meet the academic requirements for admission to the university. The first group of these marginal students were selected from the typical group of applicants who fell just below admissability. In general, their overall high school grade average was between 2.4-2.75, with SAT scores in the 700-800 range. Non-intellective factors were also considered.

This program started with the 1968 Summer Quarter. The students were required to take freshmen English and one other credit course as well as a non-credit reading and study skills class. Special counseling services and remedial English were also made available. Beginning with the Fall Quarter, they followed a regular college class schedule. It was stipulated that they would not be excluded from the university for academic reasons for one full year.

A second group was admitted to this program during the 1969 Summer session. These students, although similar to the first group with respect to their marginal academic credentials, were recruited primarily from high schools in disadvantaged areas as designated under the National Defense Student Loan Act. Most of them would not have applied for admission to the university on their own initiative. They were recruited through the combined efforts of the university, the high schools, and a citizen's committee.

The first group of these marginal students has now completed one year of college. Of the 198 students who completed the reading class during the Summer of 1968, 155 were still enrolled in the university at the end of the Spring Quarter, 1969. Their honor point averages, on a 4 point scale, ranged from .57 to 3.36 with a mean of 2.02. After one full year of college work, 52.3% have achieved a "C" average or better.

Evaluation of the Special Programs

Pending the completion of a more thorough analysis of the data we have collected on these special programs, I would like to conclude with a few observations. Although their scores on standardized reading tests covered a wide range, the majority were below the average on the norms for their respective educational levels. Within each group, including the college graduates in the law program, there were some individuals with serious reading handicaps. Inadequate vocabulary was the most frequent specific skill deficit.

Wide differences in interest and motivation were also apparent. A significant number felt that grades did not reflect their real ability and tended to blame teachers for their failures. The mean class scores on the Brown-Holtzman Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes were generally below average.

Our experience indicates that a single course does not permit adequate flexibility or time for maximum effectiveness in dealing with this range of abilities - especially the most serious deficiencies. And finally, the traditional materials and instructional methods were inadequate. Instructors must become much more flexible in their techniques and develop exercises with content relevant to the interest and experiences of these special students.

Summary

The growing awareness of and concern for the educational problems of the culturally disadvantaged has produced substantial changes in the services provided by the reading improvement program in a large urban university. The original program was designed to serve college students and that segment of the community which has traditionally been served by the university's adult education programs. The current trend is toward the development of a variety of special programs to meet the specific educational needs of the people in the inner city.